

In Jangipur's war of bidi barons, 20 lakh workers hold the key Graphic: Dipankar Chanda

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JANGIPUR: The bidi industry with its estimated 20 lakh workers is expected to play the role of decider in Jangipur Lok Sabha, around 250 kilometres north of Kolkata. It isn't without a reason that several candidates contesting the May 7 polls are bidi barons. Bidi, a traditional form of tobacco wrapped in a tendu leaf, is a major industry in Murshidabad. The owners of bidi brands are affluent industrialists, and their employees are primarily concentrated in the Jangipur Lok Sabha constituency. However, despite its political significance, bidi workers face challenges related to wages. While the minimum wage is Rs 178 per 1,000 bidis, workers often receive lower amount, ranging from Rs 100 to Rs 140. There is a demand to take it to Rs 268.

Trinamool Congress general secretary Abhisek Banerjee has already thrown his weight behind this demand. The incumbent Trinamool candidate, Khalilur Rehman, is himself a bidi industrialist. Additionally, several independent candidates in the fray also hail from the bidi industry, the presence of which underscores its potential to sway voter sentiment and electoral outcomes.

The Jangipur Lok Sabha constituency has a rich political history. Notably, in the 2004 elections, former president of India Pranab Mukherjee won from this constituency, marking a significant moment in his political career, known to be that of a 'rootless wanderer'.

In the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, TMC faces a challenge from various quarters. MLA Imani Biswas's brother, Shahjahan Biswas, is an ISF candidate, while MLA Byron Biswas's cousin, Ashadul Biswas, an independent candidate contesting for the May 7 polls. Both Shahjahan and Ashadul are bidi industrialists. With a total of 14 candidates in the fray, the political landscape in Jangipur appeared diverse and complex.

From the first election in 1967, Jangipur constituency had been a stronghold of either the Left or Congress. In 2012, however, there was a fierce fight between the Left and Congress. The battle between CPM candidate Muzaffar Hossain and Abhijit Mukherjee ended with Pranab's son victory. This was repeated again in the 2014 LS polls.

In 2019, there was a dramatic change. Trinamool candidate Khalilur Rahman won with 5,62,838 votes. Rising unexpectedly to the second position was the BJP, whose candidate Mafuza Khatun bagged 3,17,056 votes. Abhijit Mukherjee, who contested for Congress, secured 2,55,836 votes.